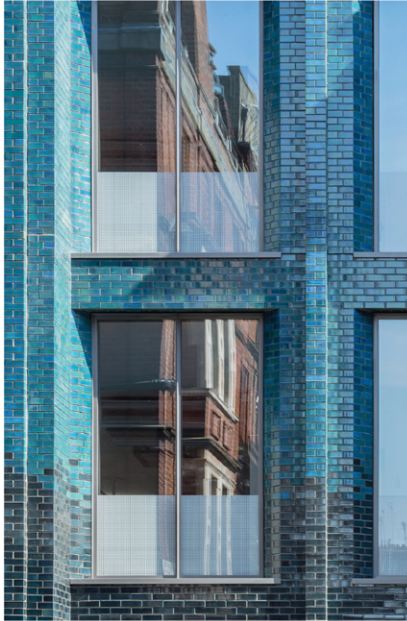
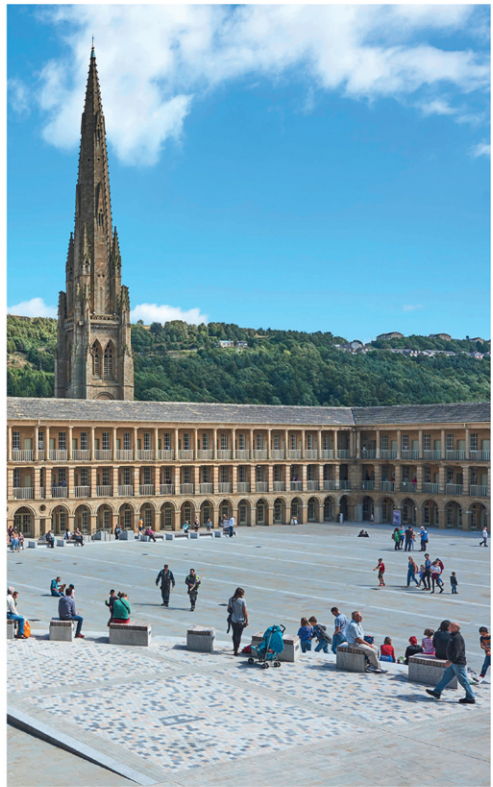


Living with Beauty

*Promoting health, well-being
and sustainable growth*



The report of the
Building Better,
Building Beautiful
Commission

JANUARY 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report we propose a new development and planning framework, which will:

- *Ask for Beauty*
- *Refuse Ugliness*
- *Promote Stewardship*

Ask for Beauty.

We do not see beauty as a cost, to be negotiated away once planning permission has been obtained. It is the benchmark that all new developments should meet. It includes everything that promotes a healthy and happy life, everything that makes a collection of buildings into a place, everything that turns anywhere into somewhere, and nowhere into home. So understood beauty should be an essential condition for the grant of planning permission.

Refuse Ugliness.

People do not only want beauty in their surroundings. They are repelled by ugliness, which is a social cost that everyone is forced to bear. Ugliness means buildings that are unadaptable, unhealthy and unsightly, and which violate the context in which they are placed. Such buildings destroy the sense of place, undermine the spirit of community, and ensure that we are not at home in our world.

Promote Stewardship.

Our built environment and our natural environment belong together. Both should be protected and enhanced for the long-term benefit of the communities that depend on them. Settlements should be renewed, regenerated and cared for, and we should end the scandal of left-behind places, where derelict buildings and vandalised public spaces drive people away. New developments should be regenerative, enhancing their environment and adding to the health, sustainability and biodiversity of their context. For too long now we have been exploiting and spoiling our country. The time has come to enhance and care for it instead. Our recommendations are designed to ensure that we pass on to future generations an inheritance at least as good as the one we have received.

We advocate an integrated approach, in which all matters relevant to placemaking are considered from the outset and subjected to a democratic or co-design process. And we advocate raising the profile and role of planning both in political discussions and in the wider debate concerning how we wish to live and what kind of a country we want to pass on.

Our proposals aim for long-term investment in which the values that matter to people – beauty, community, history, landscape – are safeguarded. Hence places, not units; high streets, not glass bottles; local design codes, not faceless architecture that could be anywhere. We argue for a stronger and more predictable planning system, for greater democratic involvement in planning decisions, and for a new model of long-term stewardship as the precondition for large developments. We advocate a radical programme for the greening of our towns and cities, for achieving environmental targets, and for regenerating abandoned places. The emerging environmental goals – durability, adaptability, biodiversity – are continuous with the pursuit of beauty, and the advocacy of beauty is the clearest and most efficient way forward for the planning system as a whole.

What we've done

12



commissioner and
advisor meetings

10



visits to 20 housing
& development sites

20



meetings to
interview 155 experts

140



responses to calls
for evidence

3



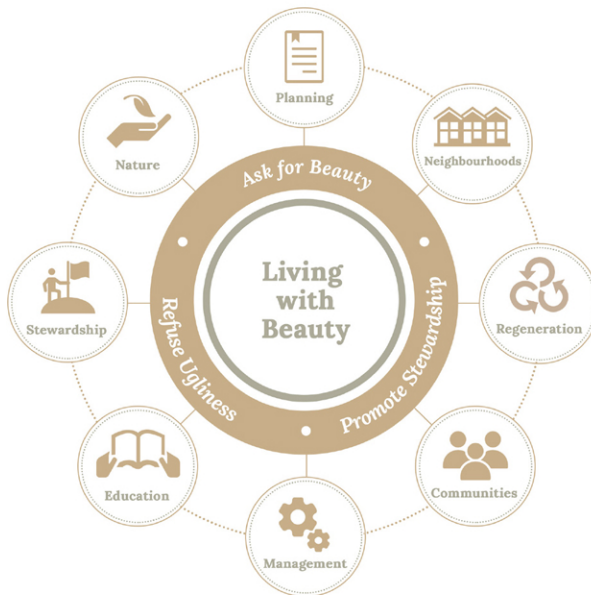
research projects
to gather more
information

8



working groups
hosting 15 meetings

EIGHT PRIORITIES FOR REFORM



- **Planning: create a predictable level playing field.** Beautiful placemaking should be a legally enshrined aim of the planning system. Great weight should be placed on securing these qualities in the urban and natural environments. This should be embedded prominently as a part of sustainable development in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and associated guidance, as well as being encouraged via ministerial statement. Local Plans should give local force to this national requirement, defining it through empirical research, including surveying local views on objective criteria. Schemes should be turned down for being too ugly and such rejections should be publicised. We have one of the most adversarial and litigious planning systems and one of the most concentrated development markets in the world. We need a clearer approach to reduce planning risk and to permit a greater range of small firms, self-build, custom-build, community land trusts and other market entrants and innovators to act as developers. In this way our planning system will better respond to the preferences of people as a whole,

within a more predictable framework. This needs to be accompanied by greater probability of enforcement and stricter sanctions when the rules are broken.

- **Communities: bring the democracy forward.** Local councils need radically and profoundly to re-invent the ambition, depth and breadth with which they engage with neighbourhoods as they consult on their local plans. More democracy should take place at the local plan phase, expanding from the current focus on consultation in the development control process to one of co-design. Having shorter, more powerful and more visual local plans informed by local views ('community codes') should help engender this; but councils will also need to engage with the community, using digital technology and other available resources. The attractiveness, or otherwise, of the proposals and plans should be an explicit topic for engagement, rather than being swept aside as of secondary importance. Beauty should be the topic of an ongoing debate between the public and the planners, with the developers bound by the result.
- **Stewardship: incentivise responsibility to the future.** Our proposals aim to change the nature of development in our country. In the place of quick profit at the cost of beauty and community, we aim for long-term investment in which the values that matter to people – beauty, community, history, landscape – are safeguarded. Hence places, not units, high streets not glass bottles, local design codes, not faceless architecture that could be anywhere. At present elements of the legal and tax regimes create a perverse (and unintended) bias in favour of a short-term site-by-site approach as opposed to a longer-term stewardship model. To change this we must confront legal and fiscal obstacles at the highest level and create a new 'stewardship kitemark.'
- **Regeneration: end the scandal of 'left-behind' places.** Too many places in this country are losing their identity or falling into dereliction. They are noisy, dilapidated, polluted or ugly, hard to get about in or unpleasant to spend time in. Such places create fewer jobs, attract fewer new businesses and have less good schools. They do not flourish. Government should commit to ending the scandal of 'left-behind' places. We need to ask 'what will help make these good places to live?' It is never enough to invest in roads or shiny 'big box' infrastructure. Development should be regenerative not parasitic. A member of Cabinet should be responsible for ensuring that new places reach the right standards, co-ordinating perspectives between the 'triangle' of housing, nature and infrastructure. At the local council level there should be a Chief Placemaker in every senior team and a member of the local Cabinet who has responsibility for placemaking. Government should align VAT on housing renovation

and repair with new build, in order to stop disincentivising the re-use of existing buildings. Brownfield sites should be promoted over greenfield sites, as targets for development. The strategy for high streets should aim to make high streets attractive places to live and spend time in; and it should respond flexibly within a clear framework to changing patterns of demand.

- **Neighbourhoods: create places not just houses.** Too much of what we build is the wrong development in the wrong place, either drive-to cul-de-sacs (on greenfield sites) or overly dense 'small flats in big blocks' (on brownfield sites). We need to develop more homes within mixed-use real places at 'gentle density', thereby creating streets, squares and blocks with clear backs and fronts. In many ways this is the most challenging of our tasks, which is to change the model of development from 'building units' to 'making places'.
- **Nature: re-green our towns and cities.** Urban development should be part of the wider ecology. Green spaces, waterways and wildlife habitats should be seen as integral to the urban fabric. The government should commit to a radical plan to plant two million street trees within five years, create new community orchards, plant a fruit tree for every home and open and restore canals and waterways. This is both right and aligned with the government's aim to eradicate the UK's net carbon contribution by 2050. It should do this using the evidence of the best ways to improve well-being and air quality. Green spaces should be enclosed and either safely private or clearly public. The NPPF should place a greater focus on access to nature and green spaces – both existing and new – for all new and remodelled developments.
- **Education and skills: promote a wider understanding of placemaking.** Our evidence gathering and discussion have discovered widespread agreement on the need to invest in and improve the understanding and confidence of professionals and local councillors. Crucial areas include placemaking, the history of architecture and design, popular preferences and (above all) the associations of urban form and design with well-being and health. The architectural syllabus should be shorter and more practical, and the government should consider ways of opening new pathways into the profession.
- **Management: value planning, count happiness, procure properly.** Planning has undoubtedly suffered from budget cuts over the last decade, with design and conservation expertise especially suffering. By having a more rules-based approach, by moving the democracy forward, by using clearer form-based codes in many circumstances, by limiting the length of planning applications and by investing in digitising data entry and process automation, it should be possible

to free up resources. We don't pretend this profound process of re-engineering will be easy. There is also a crucial need to change the corporate performance targets for Homes England, and the highways, housing and planning teams in central government and councils. They should be targeted on objective measures for well-being, public health, nature recovery and beauty (measured *inter alia* via popular support). We should be measuring quality and outcomes as well as quantity. Finally, there is an urgent need to make changes to the procurement targets, process and scoring within central and local government and, above all, Homes England. Until recently the sale processes of Homes England and other public bodies have largely failing to take adequate account of any metrics of quality. This urgently needs to change if the state is not to be effectively subsidising ugliness.

We won't be able to achieve all these changes overnight (in chapter 14 we set out a possible timeframe of implementation). However, some could be implemented very readily. While we have been working the government has published its welcome *National Design Guide* and its guidance document *Design: process and tools*, partially fulfilling our first policy proposal.

The evidence shows that a planning system and development market that had evolved in the ways we set out in this report would tend to encourage better public health, happier people, and more sociable communities. It would also help to end the scandal of 'left-behind' places whilst restoring the place of nature in the urban environment to the benefit of our lungs and our mental health. The polling and pricing data strongly suggest that such a move would be welcomed by our fellow citizens thus helping break out of the vicious circle of poor development and opposition to new homes.

That would be a good thing for those who are already well housed, for the many who have yet to find somewhere affordable to live in, and for our society as a whole so that it can be more prosperous and truly inclusive. We should again aspire, with Clough Williams-Ellis, for 'a happy awareness of beauty about us' to be 'the everyday condition of us all.'

